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ABSTRACT

This paper narrates the experiences of a superintendent hired into Montgomery Township School District (New Jersey), an affluent, small school district with a history of labor relations problems. When hired in 1990, the new superintendent was confronted with seven pending grievance cases and the board of education's rejection of the annual school budget for the first time in 20 years. In the face of these problems, the superintendent and the Montgomery Township Education Association initiated school-based decision-making as an intermediate step to site-based management. Following a school climate survey, 25 percent of district staff members received training in communication and decision-making skills. Other efforts included: (1) the establishment of quality circles at each school to encourage staff to generate recommendations and participate in decision-making; (2) the Superintendent's Curriculum Advisory Council, comprised of staff, parents, and students, returned to its original purpose of providing curriculum and instructional recommendations as opposed to being a grievance council; and (3) advisory groups were formed to provide professional and nonprofessional staff opportunities to discuss workplace issues and recommend changes in district procedures. These efforts proved successful, as all pending grievances were settled within the district, follow-up school climate surveys reflected improved staff attitudes, and the board of education and district staff negotiated a 3-year contract. (LP)

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QUALITY THROUGH INVOLVEMENT: A SCHOOL-BASED DECISION-MAKING SUCCESS STORY

by: James E. Henderson

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Quality Through Involvement: A School-Based Decision-Making Success Story

The Montgomery Township Schools form a relatively affluent, small (1,566 students K-12) school district in central New Jersey. Most students go on to college (96% in 1992), student test score data reflects very good - if not excellent - achievement, programs are often cutting-edge, and staff members are generally good to outstanding in the classroom and in co-curricular advisement and coaching.

However, labor relations history in Montgomery Township was contentious, at best, with the predictable by-products of low staff morale, disenfranchisement, and ineffective interpersonal communications. A manifestation of the disharmony came about when, after the Montgomery Township Schools Board of Education and the Montgomery Township Education Association (MTEA) entered into a tentative bargaining agreement in the previous round of negotiations in May, 1989, a full 11 strife-filled months went by before a final contract was executed. The delay was caused by distrust on both sides, and an inability to resolve collaboratively several minor, but important contract language issues.

When I came into office as the new superintendent in March 1990, I was confronted with six labor cases pending before arbitrators and one case pending before a New Jersey Administrative Law Judge. I distinctly remember my first day on the job as superintendent. An early morning meeting with the MTEA president was held to discuss a possible resolution of one of the contractual disputes. The MTEA represented all district instructional and non-instructional staff except bus drivers, administrators, and a handful of unaffiliated staff, so I was particularly interested in seeing whether any positive relationship could be built with the organization. Some headway was realized and I made other contacts during the day to attempt a dispute resolution that I could propose to the board at its regular meeting that night. In between greeting staff, students, parents, and assorted community representatives as the new superintendent, I was able to contact MTEA and New Jersey Education Association (NJEA) officials. A tentative resolution - a

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compromise - was struck.

That evening's board meeting was a real eye-opener! It began with a staff delegation marching silently into the board meeting shortly after the board president's Call to Order. After the staff members were deployed standing around the perimeter of the audience, the MTEA president read a prepared statement decrying the superintendent's selection process due to its lack of staff involvement. She noted that the concern was not directly aimed at the new superintendent - me - but at the continued manifestation of the board's and district administration's lack of regard for staff input.

The rest of the meeting didn't get much better. Board members were sharp with one another, critical of administrative reports, and obviously affronted by the MTEA demonstration. I had hoped to use the contractual dispute resolution as an olive branch. Those hopes were in vain. When I presented the proposed agreement later in the meeting, my work was greeted with hostility by some board members, almost as if I were guilty of collusion with the enemy. Even after offering a strong recommendation and rationale, my proposal was defeated. My first day on the job ended on an incredibly sour and discouraging note.

Things didn't get better right away. Discontent with government, in general, and with New Jersey Governor Florio's dramatic (and burdensome for "wealthy" school districts) tax reform package, in particular, led many parents and community members throughout New Jersey to scrutinize public education costs closely. This was coupled with a constant barrage of media stories depicting declining student test scores and increasing school employee salaries. Discontent with and even outrage over public school taxes in New Jersey was no longer the virtual exclusive province of senior citizen groups. Montgomery Township did not escape this movement. Although not as overtly organized as "watchdog" groups in other communities, a cabal formed to attend board meetings, protest expenditures, lobby for staff downsizing, and engage in a "letter to the editor" campaign denigrating the district board, budget, and administrative staff. Shortly thereafter, in April 1990, the Montgomery Township annual school budget was voted down for the

first time in almost 20 years.

In the face of those labor relations, community relations, and budgetary difficulties, the board charged me with getting the staff and community to work together in more productive ways. I decided that we needed to involve staff in school-based decision-making to tap into their creative, problem-solving abilities and to ameliorate the obvious and widespread interpersonal turmoil. School-based decision-making was conceived as an intermediate step to site-based management.

My initial goal was to have staff members' opinions heard and valued, and to have as many of their recommendations put into effect as possible. I also wanted to establish an organizational ethic that problems were to be resolved at the most immediate level, and that those problem-solvers would have the tools necessary to resolve those issues. These staff involvement, decision-making, and problem-solving behaviors have been practiced in many schools throughout the years, but we needed explicit structures in our district to nurture the desired behaviors due to the distrust, acrimony, and unwillingness of staff to become involved in perceived phony processes.

Staff members needed to develop a history of involvement in advisory and decision-making experiences. I wanted to establish a staff, student, and community consensus regarding school improvement goals and quality initiatives. Learning outcomes needed to be clearly defined and staff, students, and parents needed to be supported in purposeful activities directed toward the accomplishment of those goals. I wanted the key stakeholders in the school system to have sufficient discretion to make decisions about the means to improve the schools and student learning once the vision, outcomes, and standards were clearly defined. I also wanted to establish an organization that embraced the notion of positive change and growth, and the tolerance - indeed encouragement - of risk-taking behaviors. Then, I reasoned, we could meaningfully decide whether to proceed with the more comprehensive task of making all budgetary, personnel, and program decisions at the local site level. But the issue of site-based management was still very much in doubt and in the future in the spring of 1990.

My first step was to try to assess the severity of the problem. Besides conducting

interviews and holding discussions with members of the staff, PTA, local Boosters' Club, and student organizations, and relying on my own powers of observation, I turned to the MTEA for assistance. We jointly administered a school climate survey to staff. A professional from the NJEA was enlisted to interpret the results and those data were used to define the issues that were ultimately tackled by the school and district-wide advisory groups. One of the immediate and important issues identified by the staff was the failure of interpersonal communications in the district.

With that in mind and looking forward to the establishment of viable advisory groups, the MTEA leaders and I decided that we needed to train as many staff as possible - and certainly the potential members of our advisory groups - in excellent and productive interpersonal skills. Initially funded entirely by the NJEA and by the county association affiliate, and later jointly funded by the association and the board, a noted consultant worked with several groups of staff members, administrators, and board members. These sessions were held over a weekend and involved that included listening, speaking, and decision-making skills. Intensive and sometimes stressful simulations were employed and participants reported excellent results. Our goal was to train a critical mass of staff members (defined initially as more than 25 per cent of the total district staff) who could populate our district's staff advisory groups. Once those individuals were trained, we could proceed with the formation of Quality Circles.

Tom Peters noted in one of the leadership prescriptions in *Thriving on Chaos* that employing Quality Circles to involve staff in organizational decision-making requires the unambiguous and tangible commitment of the organization's chief executive officer. The situation in which I found myself seemed to correspond to his book title, and his caveat was quite appropriate. The chief executive - superintendent in this case - had to establish the clear direction for establishing advisory groups and the commitment to school-based decision-making. However, once the decision was made and the general parameters were formulated, staff members needed room to operate and be creative.

School-based decision-making councils (the staff preferred the name "Quality Circles") were established at each school after I had consulted with the MTEA, the school board, and the administrative team. Some of my administrators argued strongly for clearly defined and standardized operating procedures and scope of issues to be (and not to be) discussed. I resisted. In the current vernacular, I wanted our organization, and especially our administrators, to "walk our talk." I reasoned that if we were committed to soliciting staff members' input, and if we were going to increase their decision-making prerogatives in areas where they had expertise and a stake in the decision-making outcomes (per Edwin Bridges' classic formulation), they should be allowed relative autonomy in structuring their process. The only parameters I established were that the issues considered and decisions made could not violate the collective bargaining agreement, state law, and district policies. Internal school operating procedures were fair game for discussion, recommendations, and even decision-making, understanding that the building principal must retain the final responsibility for accepting recommendations and implementing decisions.

Likewise, I wanted to establish corresponding recommendatory and decision-making opportunities at the district level. The district's Superintendent's Curriculum Advisory Council (SCAC) had become a catch-all for all employee discontent. Originally negotiated as a means of securing staff, student, and community input regarding teaching and learning practices, the SCAC's agenda rapidly became the discussion forum of workplace issues since - in the telling of the staff - there were no other institutionally appropriate means of airing and resolving staff concerns short of filing grievances. I directed that the SCAC (comprised of staff, parents, and students) return to its original purpose of providing recommendations regarding district curriculum and instruction issues such as curriculum articulation, student grading, staff supervision, the enhancing of a mini-grant fund for teachers, and the redefining of the district's staff development program.

The Superintendent's Advisory Council (SAC) was then formed to provide staff members with an opportunity to discuss workplace issues and recommend changes in district procedures.

Parenthetically, I had recommended that each group jettison the word "superintendent" from the title, but both groups rejected that idea! In any case, SAC was comprised of representatives from all staff categories recruited by the MTEA and by me. Finally, because of the structure of the district's staff organization, and because the clerical staff and the maintenance and custodial staff did not feel completely "at home" operating only on the building Quality Circles, we organized separate advisory groups specifically for the clerical employees and the maintenance and custodial employees.

Results were achieved! All six pending grievances and the issues before the Administrative Law Judge were settled "out of court" and back in the district. Even the issue that I had "lost" in my first board meeting was resolved amicably with the resolution embracing essentially the same terms as were contained in my original proposal. Only one grievance was filed at the superintendent's level between 1990 and 1992 and that one I resolved without further contest. All other disagreements were settled at the most immediate level in the schools. A first-ever district-wide staff and board family picnic was held in the fall of 1990 (and repeated every year since). Other unprecedented staff and volunteer recognition programs and ceremonies were established. Furthermore, we successfully budgeted and staffed interdisciplinary team leader stipend positions at each grade level, kindergarten through grade 8. The teachers occupying those positions coordinated the instructional activities of their peers and to represent their grade level team's interests with the principal, further enhancing staff decision-making activities. These positions also turned out to be excellent leadership training experiences. Follow-up administrations of the school climate survey reflected improved attitudes of staff toward their work environment and the unresolved issues became fodder for the advisory groups. Clearly, interpersonal relationships in the district were improving.

The acid test of that improvement was the board-staff contract negotiations activities begun in the fall of 1991. Our board negotiations committee was committed to change and improvement. Likewise, the local association - representing teachers and other certificated personnel, clerical

staff, instructional aides, and maintenance and custodial employees - was also ready for a change. Association members and board representatives were disillusioned with the protracted and unproductive bargaining that had occurred in many school districts (including Montgomery), and with the bad feelings left as negotiation's residue, even in "good" settlements. Because of the mutual dissatisfaction with the collective bargaining status quo, and because of the recent improvements in staff empowerment and decision-making, both groups were willing to risk the unknown.

The board and association negotiating teams received a half-day training session on win/win bargaining philosophy and strategies before the first bargaining weekend. The two bargaining teams then met independently to list the bargaining issues in interrogative form, rather than in declarative demands. Several weeks later, members from each negotiating team met in a two-day communications session, in which each team presented a number of crucial issues to the other team in question format. Much discussion ensued, interspersed with questions for clarification, with disagreement at times, but there was a pervasive willingness to identify and solve the problems at hand. During the ensuing month, subcommittees worked extensively in many meetings to develop agreements on the issues discussed at the communications session. It was a time of frank discussions that often reflected strongly opposing points of view. But it was also a time when people felt willing to communicate openly and share issues, perspective, and possible solutions in a protected environment.

A second two-day session was held about a month after the first communications session to complete the contract negotiations. Although each subcommittee - Compensation and Contract Language - made significant progress in tentatively resolving many of the issues defined, much work remained and final agreement was not a forgone conclusion. After extended discussion and several more caucuses, we decided to agree to a comparatively modest first year percentage salary increase for staff, with the second and third year increases to be determined by an ingenious formula that included comparable local educational salary settlements as well as other non-

educational salary factors such as the regional Consumer Price Index and the state budget CAP for school districts. Other highlights of the Agreement included both teams' concurring on better instructional use of the existing school days and hours and on the need for entering into discussions regarding an extended school year.

The board and the association were also able to institutionalize and formalize the process of school-based decision-making by developing contract language that formalized the efforts of staff over the previous two years. The membership and operations of the Superintendent's Curriculum Advisory Council (SCAC) were modified and clarified and membership and operating rules for additional school decision-making bodies were established. The Superintendent's Advisory Council (SAC) would consider district-wide workplace issues; and Quality Circles, formed at each school, at the Board Office, among Buildings and Grounds staff, and among Secretarial and Aides Support Staff would address and resolve instructional and workplace issues at the most immediate level.

Within a few weeks following the final weekend bargaining session, the items of agreement were formally written in contract language, reviewed, and approved by a bilateral writing team. Montgomery Township became the first New Jersey school district to successfully implement win/win bargaining by achieving a three-year contract settlement. Without having the school-based decision-making training and experiences from which to draw, this outcome would have been much less likely - some would say impossible. As it is, the school-based decision-making tradition that is developing in Montgomery Township has empowered staff, healed old wounds, and effected more productive problem-solving networks of staff, students, parents, and community volunteers. School-based decision-making has formed the quality bedrock of the school district's improvement efforts. School-based decision-making truly does work!

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Quality Through Involvement: A Case Study of School-Based Decision-Making

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James E. Henderson served as superintendent of the Montgomery Township (NJ) Schools until the summer of 1992, before being appointed as Associate Professor and as the first Director, Interdisciplinary Doctoral Program for Educational Leaders, at Duquesne University. Dr. Henderson had served previously in a variety of school roles including teacher, assistant principal, principal, assistant superintendent for business, assistant superintendent for personnel, and superintendent in a large, urban district. He had received his Bachelors degree from Princeton University and both his Masters and Doctorate from Rutgers University.

Dr. Henderson is now serving as a Senior Associate and Win/Win Negotiations facilitator for Robert A. Dey & Associates, Inc. of Paramus, NJ. In his role as a faciltitator, Dr. Henderson continues to be amazed at the power of collaboration in healing old wounds and solving long-standing problems.

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